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SUBJECT: THREE DEMONSTRATIONS AND A CONVENTION

Classified By: Pol M/C Alice G. Wells: 1.4 (d)

Summary

11. (C) Political groupings of all stripes made their presence known in Moscow over the December 16-17 weekend:

-- "Other Russia" staged its "March of the Discontented." About 2,500 participants from a hodgepodge of groups, united only by their opposition to the current government and rejection of the electoral process.

-- The pro-Kremlin youth group "Nashi" had about 25 thousand young people from Moscow and surrounding areas don Santa suits, cavort in the streets, and distribute gifts to the city's remaining World War II veterans in commemoration of the Battle for Moscow.

-- The western-leaning democratic political party Union of Right Forces (SPS) staged its convention. Chairman Nikita Belykh criticized "Other Russia" participants for rejecting elections, and was in turn characterized by "Other Russia" speakers at its rally as a Kremlin pocket party.

-- A small group, led by the Yabloko leadership, commemorated the deaths of thirteen journalists killed since Putin became President.

12. (C) In contrast to the opposition rallies, only Nashi was allowed to march. However all the groups, regardless of their orientation, met under the watchful eyes of very large contingents of police, special forces, and FSB officers. All events went off without major incident, although several hundred would-be Other Russia participants allegedly were detained on their way to their meeting. End summary.

Other Russia, Nashi, and Yabloko Take to the Streets

13. (C) About 2,500 participants in the "Other Russia"-sponsored "March of the Discontented" convened on Mayakovskiy Square December 16. They were surrounded by an estimated eight thousand police, special forces troops, and FSB officers, and watched over by a low-flying helicopter. The speakers, among them Garry Kasparov (United Civic Front), Eduard Limonov (National Bolshevik Front), Mikhail Kasyanov (Peoples Democratic Union), Nikolay Ryzhkov (Republican Party of Russia), Irina Khakamade (Popular Democratic Union), and Evgeniya Albats (Ekho Moskvyy journalist), stressed two key themes:

-- although their politics may be very different, the

heterogeneous groups present are united in their rejection of the government;

-- the current electoral system is stacked against parties not sponsored by the Kremlin, and they do not plan to work through it for change.

14. (C) Kasparov and others promised that the December 16 rally was the first of many to come. They seemed undiscouraged by the size of the crowd, and sought to portray the rally as the beginning of a groundswell against the government. Center for Political Technologies Director Boris Makarenko told us the turnout was larger than expected and scored the demonstration as a "win" for the opposition. Other Russia's implicit point of reference in staging the rally was Ukraine's Orange Revolution, and the speakers promised to remain at the Mayakovskiy Square after the next rally if they were again refused permission to march. They promised as well that there would be a change of power in fifteen months.

15. (C) The December 17 Nashi event was not overtly political. It seemed designed more to demonstrate the strength of the Kremlin-friendly youth organization, and to strike the right, nostalgic, chord with Russia's forty million pensioners. In addition to the appeal to patriotism the WWII-related event seemed designed to provide proof to the elderly that not all of the nation's youth were in the throes of alcohol or drug addiction. The large number of Santas and Snowwhites on the street, intentionally or not, recalled the Soviet-era mass gathering of youth in komsomol and young pioneer uniforms, and provoked ridicule in some press commentaries.

16. (C) The event also showcased the organizers' deep pockets and organizational abilities. Nashi leader Vasiliy Yakemenko

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dismissed rumors that the event cost its sponsors USD 10 million, but the bus and train tickets, gifts for the veterans who had been collected in 120 cultural centers, the costumes (USD 3/outfit), and the labor of the organizers was undoubtedly expensive. Other Russia, got the greenlight to march, a fact that Yabloko Deputy Chairman Sergey Mitrokhin directly attributed to Mayor Luzhkov, who has banned all opposition demonstrations, but been more lenient with pro-Kremlin groups. Although the media estimated that 70 thousand had attended the event, the Nashi press center initially put the number at 25 thousand, then increased it, reportedly at the insistence of some of its organizers.

17. (SBU) As was the case with Other Russia, city authorities prohibited about fifty members of the Yabloko leadership and their confederates from marching in memory of murdered journalists on December 17. It did allow them to hold a meeting, however. Once again, the police presence far outstripped the size of the meeting, which at its largest totaled no more than 150 participants, including interested bystanders.

SPS Opts for the Ballot Box

18. (C) SPS's unexpectedly strong showing in the December 2 Perm region elections, where it won sixteen percent of the vote, has sparked rumors here that the party is being cultivated as the Kremlin's official right flank. Whatever the case, SPS's December 16 convention was notable for the party's seemingly decisive break with Yabloko, with whom it has conducted on-again, off-again merger talks for years. (Mitrokhin confirmed to us that Yabloko would stand alone and repeated for us Yabloko's "poison pill" condition that SPS repudiate its senior leadership (Chubais, Gaidar) and ditch its economic policies.) Belykh's party also emphatically rejected street politics as a path to power. The SPS Chairman promised the media that his party was preparing only

for the elections, while Kasparov, Kasyanov, Limonov, and company were preparing for "the revolution." The national network "Rossiya," in its December 17 news summary, was quick to pick up that theme, and to show Belykh at his best, modestly rejecting SPS Deputy Chairman Leonid Gozman's suggestion that the party Chairman alone deserved credit for the Perm election outcome. Nevertheless, Belykh was selected to be at the top of the SPS list in each of the fourteen regions where elections will be held in March.

GOR Overreaction

19. (C) The one constant in the three street meetings was the size of the police presence, which suggested a degree of unease about gatherings of any size and inclination. In a recent conversation, Movement Against Illegal Immigration President Aleksandr Belov described himself as similarly astonished at the number of uniformed law enforcement officers mustered for the November 4 Russian march. Belov, who claimed to have seen GOR reports on the threat allegedly posed by the march, believed that the authorities, after Ukraine's Orange Revolution and the unexpectedly strong reaction in January to the monetization of benefits, had decided to err on the side of caution. He thought their fears unfounded, but predicted that the nervousness would only increase in 2007.

RUSSELL